

# INITIAL SCOPING

## MT. ROSE CORRIDOR HAZARDOUS FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT

CARSON RANGER DISTRICT

HUMBOLDT-TOIYABE NATIONAL FOREST

Washoe County, Nevada



*Figure 1: Mt. Rose from the valley floor.*



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest Service  
Intermountain Region

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## COMMENTS WELCOME

The Forest Service is proposing the Mt. Rose Corridor Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project on the Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. This project would focus on the reduction of wildland fuels through vegetation management treatments. The project is located in Washoe County, Nevada, approximately 10 miles southwest of the city of Reno. Most of the units proposed for treatment are adjacent to Mt. Rose Highway (Hwy 431), and some units extend south towards Washoe Valley. Figure 2 is a vicinity map of this project area.

The Forest Service is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations for this action. The Environmental Assessment will disclose the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action.

The purpose of this initial scoping document is to inform interested and affected parties of the project proposal. Comments, ideas, and concerns from the public are important to the design and analysis of this project. The comments provided will be utilized in the preparation of the EA and in making the decision. Comments should be specific, within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons to be considered. Comments would be most useful if they were submitted by June 15, 2020. A formal comment period as required by NEPA will be provided at a later date.

To obtain additional information or to submit a comment, please contact the following:

- Annabelle Monti,  
Forester/Project Lead: 775-  
884-8103,  
[annabelle.monti@usda.gov](mailto:annabelle.monti@usda.gov)

## BACKGROUND

Fire exclusion, primarily through fire suppression during the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has had far reaching effects to fire-dependent ecosystems throughout the western United States. The vegetation communities that occur near the wildland urban interface within this project area were historically thinned and fuel loading was reduced through frequent, low intensity fires that occurred every 6 to 30 years (LandFire data).

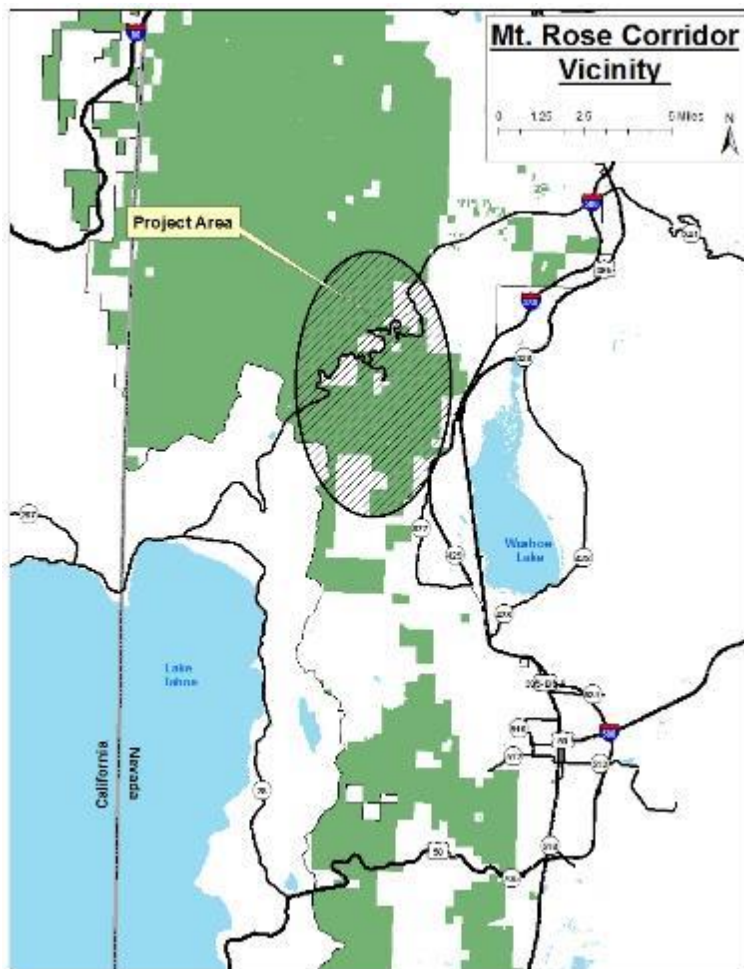


Figure 2: Project vicinity map

The Mt. Rose Corridor Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project would focus on the reduction of wildland fuels identified as priority areas for treatment in the Carson Range Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy (Update 2018). Past projects in the area include:

- Arrowhawk Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
- North Washoe and Bower's Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
- Little Valley Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
- Ophir-Lewer's Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project
- Atoma Insect Salvage and Fuels Reduction Project

## Proposed Project Location

The project area is located in Washoe County, Nevada, approximately 15 miles southwest of the city of Reno. The Mt. Rose Highway (Hwy 431) transects the project area. Elevational range for the analysis area is from 5,100 feet near Bower's Mansion Regional Park in Washoe Valley, to 9,600 feet near the Mt. Rose Ski Resort. The analysis area is comprised primarily of conifer, shrubland, riparian, and grassland areas. Figure 3 shows the acres of each vegetation type throughout the project analysis area.

## Need for the Proposal

As wildfires throughout the western United States grow in magnitude, frequency, duration, and severity, the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is focusing on increasing the scale of management actions to anticipate and mitigate these amplified fire effects. As described above, management actions that reduce the ladder and ground fuels, as well as the use of prescribed fire, are needed to address the increase in wildfire magnitude and severity.

The need of this project is to:

- Reduce hazardous fuels to provide for defensible areas in order to control and/or suppress future wildland fires.
- Improve forested condition in the greater Mt. Rose Highway corridor to increase forest resistance and resiliency to disturbance.
- Improve wildlife habitat suitability and connectivity, as well as protect and improve watershed function.
- Maintain previously implemented vegetation treatments to increase and prolong their effectiveness.

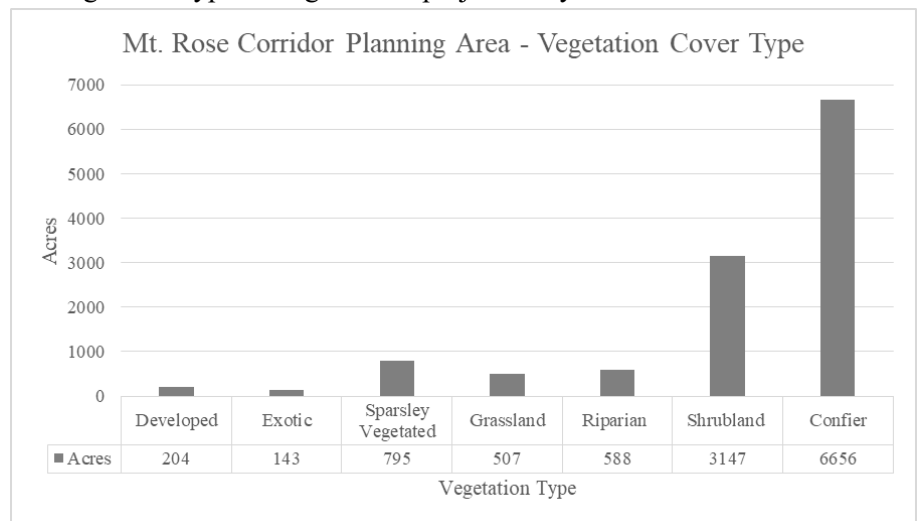


Figure 3: Vegetation cover types within the project area

- The project area is a popular destination for a variety of recreational activities including biking, hiking, and skiing. Actions are needed to sustain these uses.

Without naturally occurring fire, or some type of substitute disturbance, the forest stand structure and tree species composition of the lower elevations of this project area have been altered, leading to high fuel loading in some cases. This creates the potential for abnormal impacts to the area in the event of a wildland fire. These abnormal impacts could include fire size, fire intensity, and fire severity. The vegetation communities found in the upper elevations of this project area have longer fire return intervals, but those areas have also been altered through fire suppression and a changing climate, leading to a need for forest management activities throughout the elevational range of this analysis area.

The range of elevation within the Mt. Rose highway corridor represents the multitude of characteristics found on the Carson Ranger District, ranging from the wildland urban interface in the shrublands at the valley floor to the high elevation mixed conifer forest stands near Mt. Rose Summit. These variable environments are imperative for almost all resource areas. The Mt. Rose area provides limitless recreational opportunities throughout the year, valuable wildlife habitat for Forest Sensitive species, it's one of the major contributing watersheds to the great Reno area, and it provides invaluable viewsheds to the public who live and travel through the area. The socio-economic impacts of a damaging wildfire in this area would take generations to recover from.

<b><u>VCC</u></b>	<b><u>Percent Burnable Acres</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>	<b><u>Potential Risks</u></b>
Very Low, Vegetation Departure 0-16%	<1%	Within the natural (historical) range of variability of vegetation characteristics; fuel composition; fire frequency, severity and pattern; and other associated disturbances.	Fire behavior, effects, and other associated disturbances are similar to those that occurred prior to fire exclusion (suppression) etc. Composition and structure of vegetation and fuels are similar to the natural (historical) regime. Risk of loss of key ecosystem components are low.
Low to Moderate, Vegetation Departure 17-33%	6%		
Moderate to Low, Vegetation Departure 34-50%	88%	Moderate departure from the natural (historical) regime of vegetation characteristics; fuel composition; fire frequency,	Fire behavior, effects, and other associated disturbances are moderately departed (more or less severe). Composition and structure of

Moderate to High, Vegetation Departure 51-66%	4%	severity and pattern; and other associated disturbances.	vegetation and fuel are moderately altered.  Risk of loss of key ecosystem components are moderate.
High, Vegetation Departure 67-83%	1%	High departure from the natural (historical) regime of vegetation characteristics; fuel composition; fire frequency, severity and pattern; and other associated disturbances.	Fire behavior, effects, and other associated disturbances are highly departed (more or less severe). Composition and structure of vegetation and fuel are highly altered. Risk of loss of key ecosystem components are high.
Very High, Vegetation Departure 84-100%	0%		

*Table 1: Vegetation condition class descriptions*

Vegetation condition class (VCC) is a measure of departure from reference (pre-settlement, natural, or historical ecological conditions) that typically result in altered native ecosystem components. VCC departure was used to assess the ecological departure from natural fire regimes. These ecosystem components include attributes such as species composition, structural stage, stand age, canopy closure, and fuel loadings. One or more of the following may have caused departure – fire suppression, past management activities such as timber harvest or livestock grazing, introduction of exotic and noxious species, introduced insects and diseases are all examples of potential causes of departure from reference conditions.

The vegetation condition class of the analysis area shows that a large portion of the area is low to moderately departed from the natural condition. This shows that with strategic planning and implementation, this area can be managed to avoid a large departure from its natural condition in order to prevent uncharacteristic impacts from disturbance, most notably wildland fire. Table 1 shows the ratios of vegetation condition classes within the project area.

Fire history records indicate there have been fires of significance affecting the general Mt. Rose area since before 1950. Several large-scale fires have occurred adjacent to this area, including the Washoe Drive (2011), Martis (2001), and Little Valley (2016). Other smaller fires have also occurred within the project area throughout the years. There is a need to develop a long-term strategy to identify and conduct mechanical treatments and prescribed fire in vegetation communities most in need of restoration and maintenance as well as interrupt critical fire paths. This will help defend the landscape, both from within the project boundary as well as from impinging fire from outside, by increasing the forested area's resistance in the event of a wildfire. Figure 4 is a map showing the potential hazard risk within the project area, based on the principles described above.

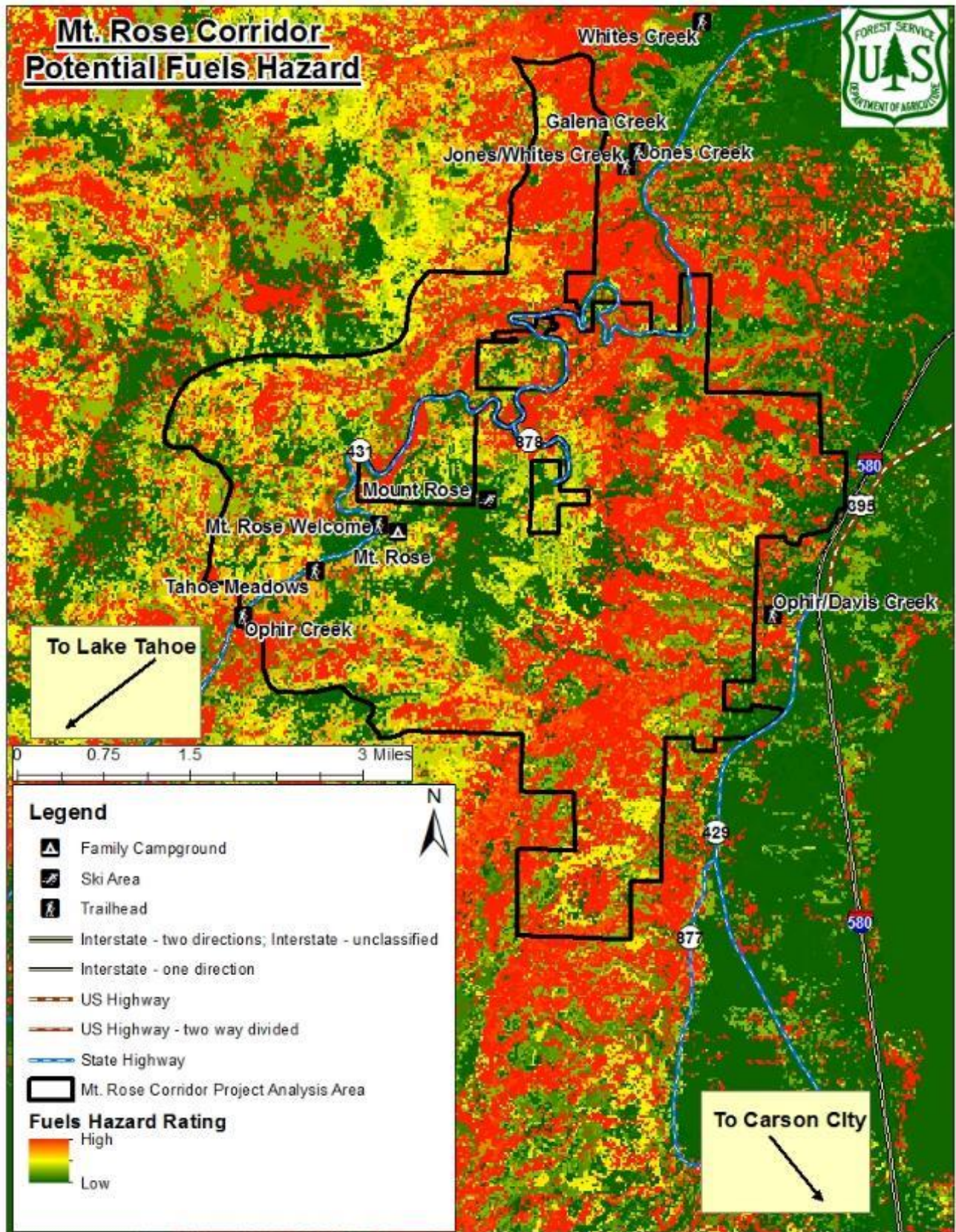


Figure 4: Potential fuels hazard map

## **Forest Plan Direction**

The Sierra Forest Plan Amendment (2004) recognizes the need for fire and fuels management on the landscape to protect infrastructure value, wildlife habitat, and ecological processes.

Consistent with the Forest Plan Direction to reduce threats to communities and wildlife habitat from large, severe wildfires and re-introducing fire into fire-adapted ecosystems, Desired Condition and Management Goals for this project include:

- Treating fuels in a manner that significantly reduces wildland fire intensity and rate of spread, thereby contributing to more effective fire suppression and fewer acres burned;
- Treating hazardous fuels in a cost-efficient manner to maximize program effectiveness; and
- Actively restoring fire-adapted ecosystems by making demonstrated progress in moving acres out of unnaturally dense conditions and moving those acres towards historical conditions.

With the disparities of the vegetation condition class across the project area there is a need to manage hazardous fuels in and around communities, combines with strategic placement of fuels treatments across broad landscapes to modify wildland fire behavior.

### **Goals for fuels treatments include:**

- Strategically-placed treatment acres across the landscape in order to interrupt potential fire spread
- Prepare treated acres to cause a fire to burn at lower intensities and slower rates of spread compared to untreated areas.

## **Proposed Action**

The Forest Service is proposing to treat large portions of the analysis area using mechanical and manual measures, as well as prescribed fire, to reduce hazardous fuels and move the area towards a vegetation condition class more representative of historical conditions. These vegetation treatments would increase the resistance and resilience of forested areas to disturbance through improving forest health, reducing ladder fuels, and

Goals for treatment include:

- Strategically-placed treatment acres across the landscape in order to interrupt the potential fire spread
- Prepare treated acres to cause a fire to burn at lower intensities and slower rates of spread compared to untreated areas.

Treatment implementation would occur over several years, and some areas of this project would receive more than one entry for treatment, as well as using multiple tools in order to reach the desired objectives. For example, an area may be thinned to reduce ladder fuels, and then would be under burned using prescribed fire to reintroduce fire onto the landscape and maintain the

desired fuel loading. In addition, areas within this analysis area are in need of maintenance from earlier implementation. The effects of those maintenance treatments would be included in this analysis. Figure 5 is a map showing area where treatments are proposed. A host of treatment options are being considered to meet the objectives of this proposed project. Table 2 describes the potential treatments that may be implemented.

<u>Treatment Type</u>	<u>Description</u>
Mechanical Equipment – Could occur in all units.	<p>This may include, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masticator – tracked machine equipped with a mulching head used to masticate brush and small diameter trees.</li> <li>• Feller buncher – tracked machine with a saw head used to cut larger diameter trees and deck them for processing.</li> <li>• Yarders – a machine that drags trees of all sizes to a specific landing location for processing.</li> <li>• Chipper – a large piece of tracked equipment used to chip smaller diameter trees and limbs. Chips would be broadcast back into the implementation area.</li> </ul>
Handwork – Could occur in all units.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crews with chainsaws who cut brush and small diameter trees.</li> <li>• Slash may be piled for burning in the winter, chipped on site, or lopped and scattered depending on the amount.</li> </ul>
Prescribed Fire – Could occur in all units.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Piles created through handwork and machine operations would be burned during the wetter, cooler months once the slash has dried.</li> <li>• Understory fire would be used to reduce surface and fine fuel loading and to also maintain treatments that have been previously implemented. Prescribed fire is an important tool that can treat large areas relatively inexpensively, as well as provide important ecosystem benefits of reintroducing fire to areas that historically burned.</li> </ul>
Grazing – Units A, C, D, and E only.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Livestock (sheep and goats) would be utilized for targeted grazing within specific units of the project area. Targeted grazing can remove fine fuels and litter, as well as seeds, which may inhibit the reproduction of certain invasive weed species.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Proposed treatment description

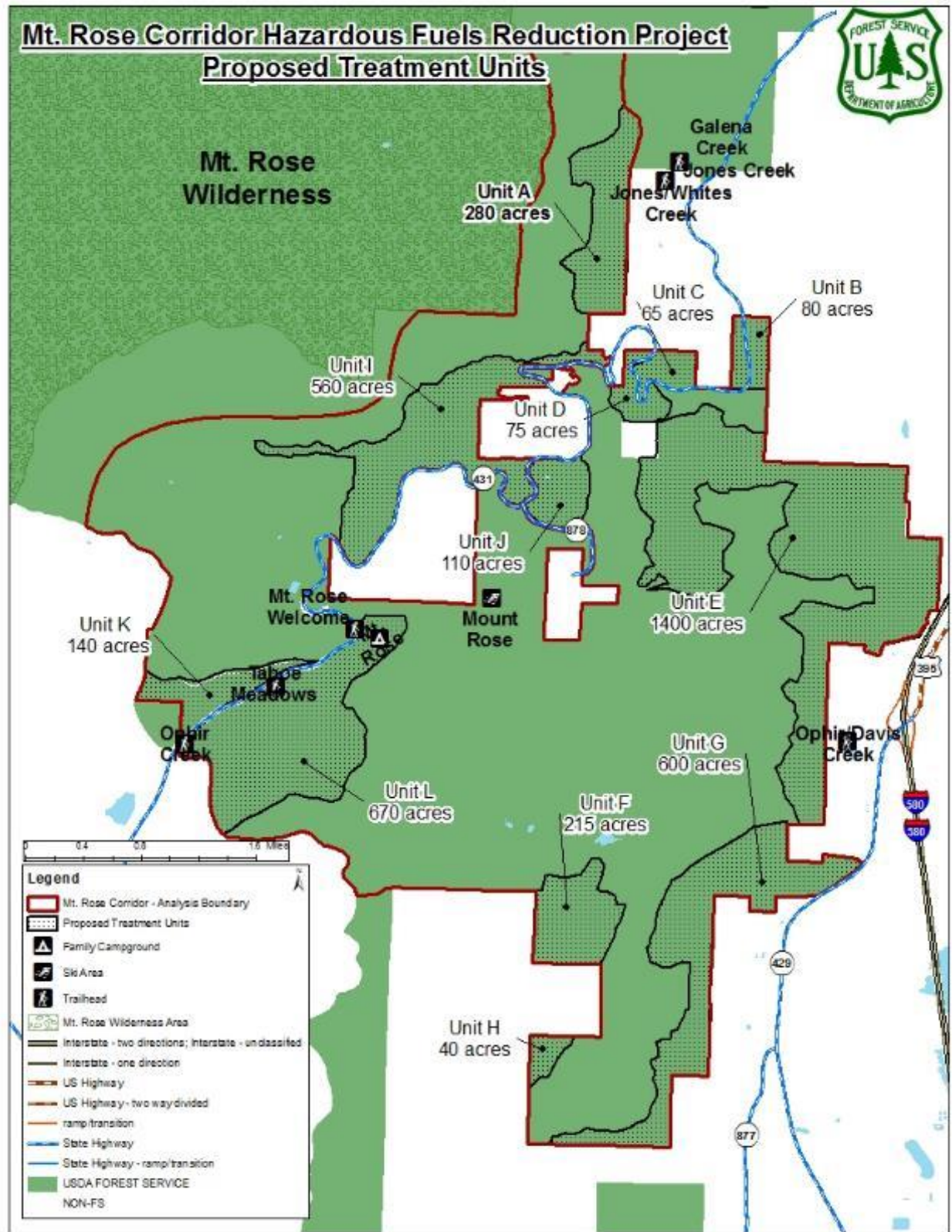


Figure 5: Proposed treatment map

## COMMENT PROCESS

The Forest Service encourages your substantive comments on this proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the responsible official should consider in reaching a decision.

Your comments will help us prepare an environmental assessment on the proposed action. The assessment will be used to determine whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact. If there is no potential for significant impacts, that finding along with the environmental assessment and a proposed decision will be sent to those who commented. If the environmental assessment concludes that there is the potential for significant impacts then an environmental impact statement would be prepared. In addition to the Proposed Action, a No Action (no vegetation treatment implementation) alternative will also be analyzed in the environmental assessment.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral, and electronic comments concerning this action for initial scoping will be accepted through June 15, 2020. A formal comment period will be available at a later date.

Comments must be submitted to: District Ranger, Carson Ranger District, 1536 South Carson St. Carson City, Nevada 89701 fax 775 884-8199. The office business hours for those submitting comments in person are: 8am to 4:30pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.

Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), and Word (.doc) to [annabelle.monti@usda.gov](mailto:annabelle.monti@usda.gov). Please ensure comments have an identifiable name attached.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection and will be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information, please contact Annabelle Monti, Forester/Project Manager at 775-884-8103 or [annabelle.monti@usda.gov](mailto:annabelle.monti@usda.gov).

Thank you for your existing interest and involvement in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. The Forest Service is transitioning to a web based electronic mailing system that allows all interested parties to receive project material (scoping documents, updates, draft and final NEPA documents, and decisions) by email. This new system gives you direct control over which mailing lists you are subscribed to and immediate electronic access to project documents as they are posted online.

To subscribe to this new system you may go online now to migrate to electronic notifications, by following this link: [http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa\\_project\\_exp.php?project=42781](http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_project_exp.php?project=42781). Once at the project site you will see a box titled "Get Connected" on the right hand side of the page. In the box is a "Subscribe to Email Updates" menu item. When you click on that item you will be prompted to provide your email address and select a pass word. When you have logged in you will be able to manage your account by subscribing to projects by Forest, District, project type, or project purpose. You will also be able to change your email address and password, or delete subscriptions for projects you no longer wish to follow or which have been completed. Once you are subscribed your name will be removed from the existing postal mailing lists.